

Set Emergency Maintenance Procedures To Avoid Damage and Confusion By Doug Chasick

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Residents' maintenance needs can vary greatly, from changing a hard-to-reach light bulb to fixing an overflowing toilet that's flooding a bathroom. Some of your residents' maintenance requests, while important, may not be emergencies. But other resident's requests may need an immediate response to protect your residents' health and safety and your property.

It's important that residents know how to distinguish between emergency maintenance requests, which demand an immediate response, even after-hours, and non-emergency maintenance requests. It's also important that residents know what to do and whom to contact if they have an emergency maintenance request. You don't want residents to waste time looking for a phone number while water is flooding their apartment and ruining your property.

To ensure that residents know what a maintenance emergency is and what to do if one occurs, give them a memo telling them your community's emergency maintenance procedures, suggests management expert Doug Chasick.

Why Informing Residents is Important

The most important reason to inform residents about your emergency maintenance procedures is to ensure that emergency maintenance problems are fixed with the least amount of damage to residents and your property.

Another important reason is to educate residents about how you do business, says Chasick. If residents know your procedures for handling maintenance requests, they'll have no standing to complain if it takes your staff longer to, say, repair a minor leak in the sink of a second or third bathroom than to fix an overflowing toilet in a one-bathroom apartment, he points out. At the very least, residents will appreciate being clued in on how the community works. And letting them know your emergency maintenance procedures can ease relations between maintenance staff and residents who are irate because their requests aren't getting top priority.

PAM Says: Putting your emergency maintenance procedures in writing and distributing it to residents may even prevent fair housing problems, says Chasick. For example, if an African-American resident feels that his maintenance request wasn't responded to as quickly as a white resident's, the written emergency maintenance procedures could prove that the white resident's problem got priority because it was an emergency.

What Memo Should Say

You should give all your existing residents and any new residents a memo of your emergency maintenance procedures either at renewal or at move-in. You should also give the memo to maintenance staff members so that everyone is on the same page. If you use an answering service or call center to answer maintenance calls or after-hours calls, you should give those employees a copy of this memo, as well. Your memo, should tell residents:

Which maintenance problems are emergencies. Tell residents which specific maintenance problems will be considered emergencies. Our memo says the following problems are maintenance emergencies:

- No heat in cold weather;
- No air-conditioning in extremely hot weather;
- Loss of electrical power;
- Sewer backups;

- Toilet clogs in apartments with only one bathroom;
- Major overflow from toilet, washing machine, dishwasher, or hot water heater, or any other water intrusion;
- Gas leaks or no gas;
- Lack of hot water;
- Frozen pipes;
- Broken refrigerator;
- Wild animal, such as a squirrel, in apartment;
- Natural disaster, such as flood, fire, storm, or wind damage;
- Broken elevator; and
- Security-related problem, such as vandalism or broken window, door, or lock.

Your memo should list any other types of emergencies that are common or unique to your region or community's features.

Your emergency response time. Tell residents that maintenance requests are prioritized and treated accordingly. Say that maintenance emergencies will be responded to first and will be addressed immediately and that other requests will be responded to as soon as possible. Also say that your staff will try to complete all maintenance requests within 24 hours.

How to inform you of emergency. Give residents a business hours phone number and an after hours phone number, if applicable, to call to report an emergency. And tell residents that if they're asked to leave a message, they should give the following information: their name, apartment number, and phone number; the nature of the problem, and where the problem is located within the apartment; and permission for the maintenance staff to enter the apartment if the resident isn't home when they come to fix the problem, says Chasick. That way, your maintenance staff won't have to waste time calling the residents back for details, he explains.

PAM Says: If your community encourages residents to submit maintenance requests via-email, it's a good idea to ask residents to call in their maintenance emergencies to ensure a quicker response.

Number for police, fire department, and ambulance. Give residents the number to call for emergencies that may also need to be handled by outside agencies, such as the police or fire department. Tell residents that in the event of such an emergency, they should also call the office or after hours number to report the emergency.